

LEISURE & ARTS

MASTERPIECE

Anatomy of a classic

Louis Armstrong's Revolution

The 80th anniversary of a celebrated American recording

BY JOHN EDWARD HASSE

FROM 1925 TO 1928, bandleader and trumpeter Louis Armstrong led a recording group, known as the Hot Five and Hot Seven, through nearly 90 recordings. These tracks are now considered among the most seminal, enduring and influential recordings not only in jazz but in American music and include "Big Butter and Egg Man," "Hotter Than That," "Struttin' With Some Barbecue," "Potato Head Blues," and "S.O.L. Blues." In these dozens of sides, Armstrong abandoned the traditional collective improvisation of New Orleans-style jazz and almost single-handedly transformed the music from a group art into an art form for the soloist. He left behind two- and four-bar breaks of earlier jazz in favor of entire choruses of improvisation. In the 1920s, Armstrong would, more than anyone else, take the role of soloist to new heights in American music.

Having switched in 1925 from the cornet to the trumpet, Armstrong set new standards for trumpeters, extending the playable range of the instrument with impressive high notes. Besides his technical mastery, what else set him apart? His big, beautiful tone; his rich imagination as a soloist; his perfect sense of time; his deep understanding of the blues; his projection and authority; and the



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force of his musical personality.

And he boasted a gift for personalizing the material he recorded, transforming it into music that is unmistakably his in sound and style and ownership. The essence of jazz—making something new out of something old, making something personal out of something shared—has no

finer exemplar than Armstrong.

On a summer's day in late June 1928, Armstrong and his quintet, the Hot Five, went into a recording studio in Chicago and created his supreme masterpiece, one that summarizes the brilliance of his art and points a way forward for all jazz—and many other kinds of music as

well. He chose a piece composed by his mentor, King Oliver, called "West End Blues"—a work named for a resort outside of New Orleans, the city from which both Armstrong and Oliver had come. Oliver recorded "West End Blues" nine days before Armstrong, but it is Armstrong's June 20 version that made history. In it, he transforms Oliver's

piece from an ordinary, slow blues into an artistic achievement of the highest order.

Right off the bat, in the dazzling opening cadenza, you can hear Armstrong's musical virtuosity, daring and imagination. In classical music, a cadenza—a free-sounding, virtuosic passage—typically comes at the end. Here, Armstrong boldly opens the

piece in this surprising, unaccompanied way. Its bravura nature underscores the influence that opera had on Armstrong: Growing up in culturally polyglot New Orleans, he was a musical sponge.

Except for a lackluster trombone solo in the second chorus, each of the five choruses makes musical magic. One marvels at the clarion sound of Armstrong's trumpet, the unique tone of his scating vocals, the unpredictable piano solo of Earl Hines, and Armstrong's long-held note in the final chorus.

With this recording, Armstrong inaugurated an era of modern musical expression where individuality and genius could dazzle and shine. As a trumpeter and singer, Armstrong set a sky-high benchmark of originality and artistry, and he came to influence—directly or indirectly—just about every instrumentalist and singer in jazz and, ultimately, many performers of other kinds of music. He became, to fellow musicians, a hero of epic proportions.

The "West End Blues" track has been widely reissued. It is available on the single-disc "Ken Burns' Jazz: Louis Armstrong" (Sony Legacy), as well as on the four-disc "Louis Armstrong: The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings" (Sony Legacy). JSP Records has issued them as the four-CD "Louis Armstrong: The Hot Fives and Sevens," with superior remastering by the U.K. engineer John R.T. Davies.



The 80th anniversary of a celebrated American recording



While musicians long recognized the brilliance of the recording—it was a favorite of young Billie Holiday—the canonization of Armstrong's disc took on momentum in 1968 when composer-conductor Gunther Schuller, in his "Early Jazz," devoted five pages of the book to extolling the virtues of "West End Blues." It "served notice," he argued, "that jazz had the potential to compete with the highest order of previously known expression." The recording became a highlight of the 1973 "Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz," a cornerstone of jazz education for 25 years, and it was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1974. Jazz textbooks now recognize it as a landmark recording, and classical-music textbooks discuss it alongside Beethoven symphonies and Schubert songs. "West End Blues" has been transcribed and published in the series "Essential Jazz Editions" so that high-school and college ensembles can perform and learn from it. It is even included in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's list of "500 Songs That Shaped Rock and Roll."

After 80 years, Louis Armstrong's "West End Blues" is still musically fresh and emotionally compelling. Now those are signs of transcendent art.

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